

No. 9.—ELY

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# Portfolio OF English Cathedrals



With Historical and  
Architectural Notes  
By ARNOLD FAIRBAIRNS

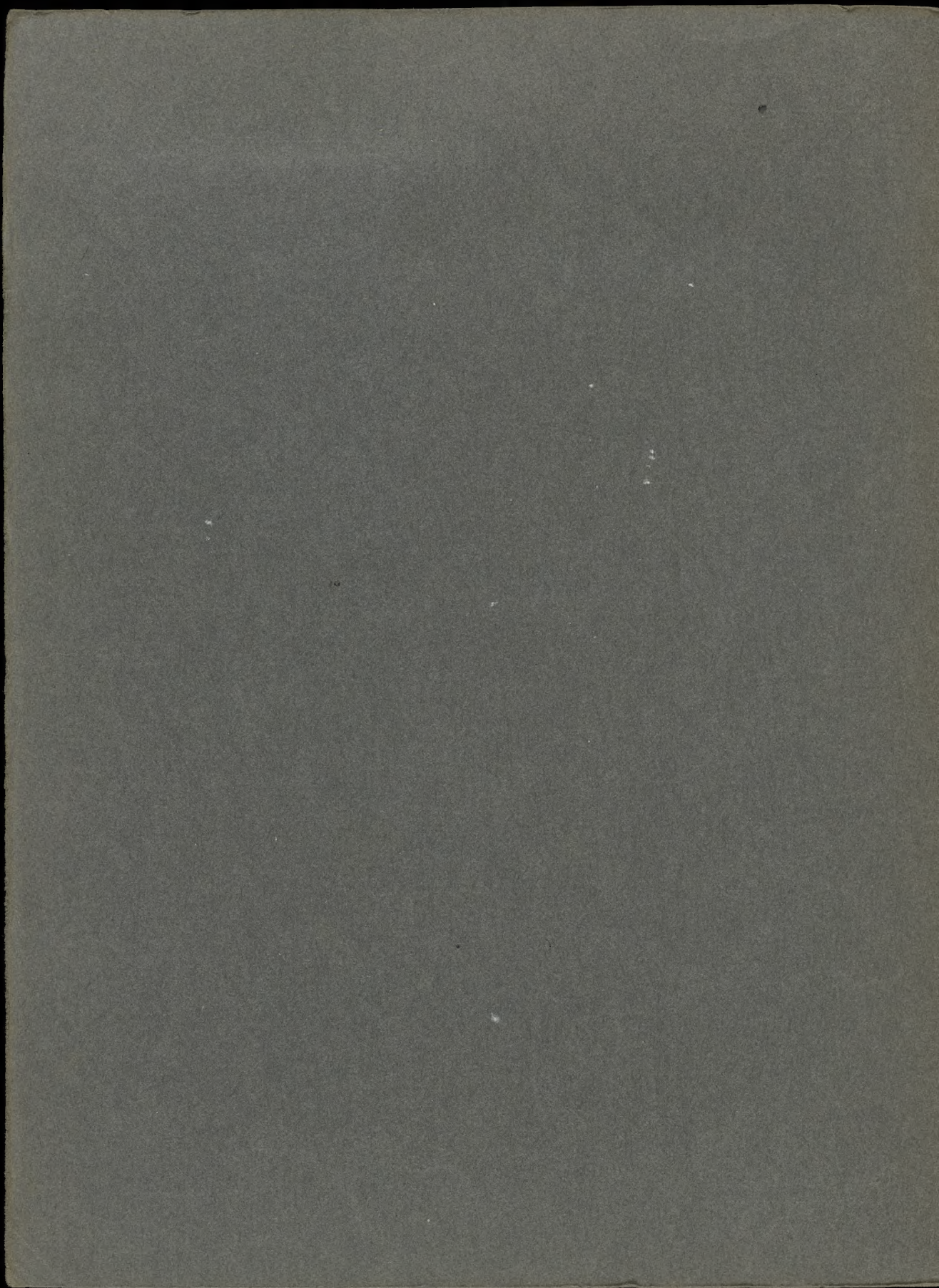


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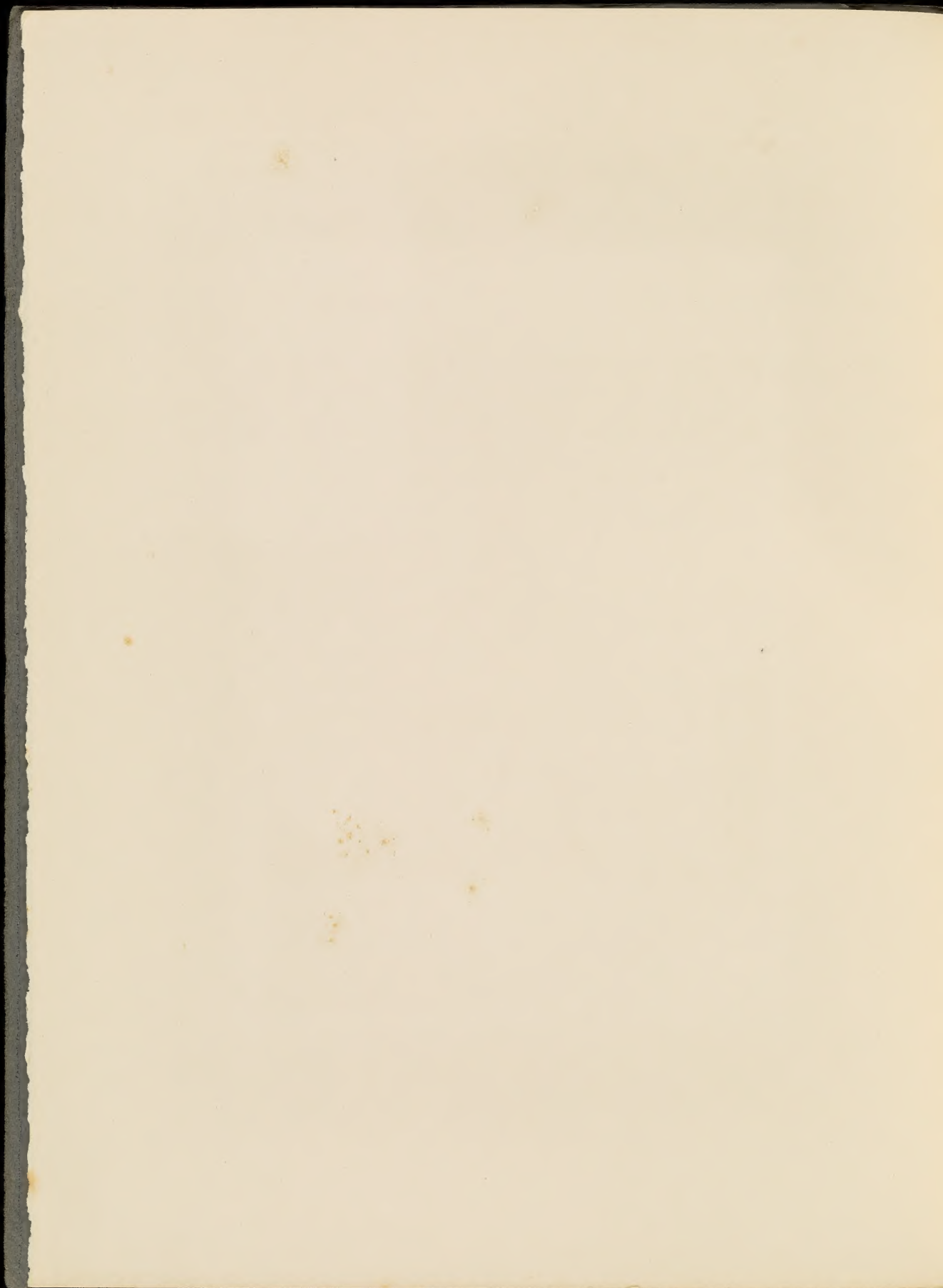








ELY CATHEDRAL



## INTRODUCTION



**G**UTHRED, third daughter of Anna, King of East Anglia, was born near Newmarket about 630. At an early age, under the influence of her aunt, St. Hilda, of Whitby, she vowed to devote herself to the religious life, but for political reasons was forced to marry in turn Tonbert, a prince of the fenmen, and Egfrid, son of Oswy of Northumbria. When the latter succeeded to his father's kingdom Etheldreda resolved to retire from the world, took the veil at the hands of St. Wilfrid, and sought shelter in the desolate Isle of Ely, which her first husband had given her. There in 673 she founded a double house of monks and nuns, over which she presided till her death in 679. Her sisters, Sexburga and Ermenilda, and the latter's daughter, Werburga, in turn ruled the house, but nothing further is recorded till 870 when the Danes, the only enemy capable of penetrating the watery defences of the island, sacked and burned the sanctuary of peace. A hundred years later Bishop Ethelwold, as at Peterborough, refounded the house as a Benedictine monastery, which became the camp of refuge in 1070 for Hereward's gallant band, whose story has been immortalized by Charles Kingsley.

Of the Saxon church no fragments remain, the cross of St. Ovin, Etheldreda's steward, being the only link with that period. Abbot Simeon began a new church in 1083, but it did not assume its present noble appearance till the completion of the octagon in 1342. Since then it has suffered severely at the hands of Bishop Goodrich in 1541, and the destroyers Essex and Wyatt in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Puritans, though they destroyed the cloisters and the glass and stopped the services, did less damage than usual, for Cromwell had lived under the shadow of the church and must have come to love it. The modern restoration begun by Dean Peacock in 1843 has been one of the most successful in England.

The diocese was created in 1109, Henry fearing the undivided wealth and power of the abbot in his liberty. The revenues of that official were given to the bishop, and the prior became the head of the house. So to this day there is no episcopal throne in the cathedral, the bishop taking the abbot's stall and the dean the prior's.

Several names of interest, besides the builders, occur in the roll of the bishops. Nigel, William Longchamp, Thomas Bouchier, John Morton, John Alcock, Lancelot Andrewes, Peter Gunning are a few of those who took a prominent part outside the diocese in the affairs of the church and the state. One name is wanting from the list which the monks would fain have added—Alan of Walsingham, their beloved prior and master builder. Twice they elected him, but the Pope was obdurate. To leave, however, in beautiful works, a lasting influence for good, is a reward for which many a man has striven but few have gained—the highest reward of the great artist-teachers of men.

## THE WEST FRONT

THERE has been much discussion whether the monks ever built both parts of their western transept. Fairly conclusive evidence, however, has been brought to prove that Ely at one time did undoubtedly boast this unusual feature with five towers rising above it. Peterborough and Ely were keen rivals in the matter of building, both striving to attract pilgrims by the grandeur of their churches, so that it is no surprise to find features common to both, such as this western transept.

The great tower, 215 feet in height, belongs to two periods, the lower part late twelfth century, the upper part fifteenth century. It originally carried a small spire, but this was taken down in 1801.

Lincoln, Durham, and Ely alone have Galilee Porches: the example here is perhaps the finest. It is unhesitatingly ascribed by the chronicler to Bishop Eustace (1198—1215), in which case it is a striking example of the rapid development of the Early English style. Essex proposed to pull it down in 1757, but luckily the authorities saved it, though they allowed Wyatt fifty years later to mutilate it severely.



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THE WEST FRONT

## THE NAVE

IT is indeed a most happy chance that the great Norman nave of St. Etheldreda's church is one of the best proportioned buildings of the period in England, for the later builders adhered absolutely to the original elevation when the presbytery and choir were built. The result is an unusual and striking harmony throughout, which is even more pleasing than the perfect unity of Exeter or Salisbury.

Abbot Richard (1100—07) built two bays of the nave to abut his central tower, and the western transept was finished ninety years later; a gradual development of style is thus seen from early Norman to very late.

The ceiling was designed and the western part painted by Mr. Le Strange; on his death in 1862, Mr. Gambier Parry finished the work together with the octagon. It is a splendid piece of designing, and the skilful choice of colours adds greatly to the apparent height of the nave. In the south aisle are the splendid Prior's and Monks' doorways, together with the Saxon cross bearing Ovin's pathetic prayer. The Norman rood screen was pulled down by Essex; its site was just east of the matrix which is traditionally said to mark Alan of Walsingham's grave.

## THE CHOIR, LOOKING EAST

BISHOP NORTHWOLD (1229—54) having resolved to provide a shrine more worthy of the holy Etheldreda, pulled down the Norman apse and built a presbytery of six bays in the Early English style. The grand group of lancets at the east end is one of the noblest creations in the whole range of Gothic architecture. Of the carving of the capitals, the bosses, and the corbels, Professor Freeman's opinion, enthusiastic though it be, is hard to contravert. "Lovelier detail," he says, "was surely never wrought by the hand of man," and though the work of the Southwell and Lincoln sculptors may challenge the statement, it would be difficult to say it surpasses Bishop Northwold's creation.

Into this glorious sanctuary the body of the saint, in the divinely-given marble sarcophagus, was translated with great pomp, and the whole church dedicated in 1252 to St. Mary, St. Peter, and St. Etheldreda, in the presence of King Henry III.

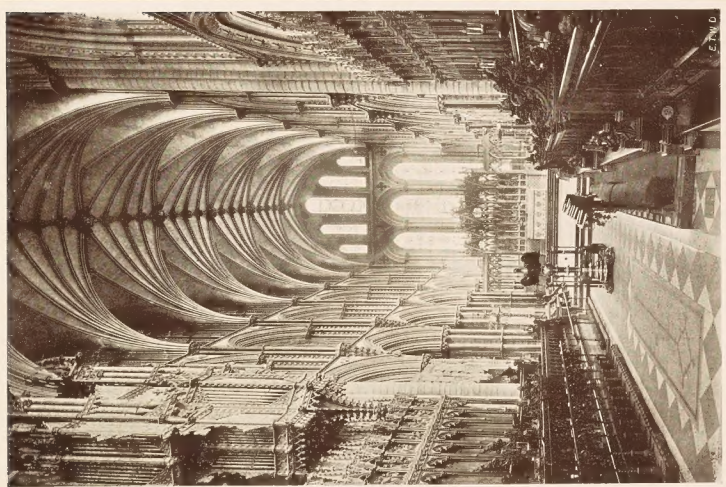
After various changes the choir has been finally settled in the three western bays, and Sir Gilbert Scott's gorgeous altar placed between the fourth and fifth bays of the presbytery. The eastern windows have been filled with excellent glass by Wailes, and the fine view of the choir from the nave fortunately preserved by the placing of the organ in the triforium.



ELY CATHEDRAL



THE NAVE



THE CHOIR, LOOKING EAST

## THE OCTAGON

THE Norman central tower fell in 1322 and destroyed the choir in its fall. It must have been with mixed feelings that the monks viewed the ruin of their church, for though they had lost a building rich in memories of the past, they had an architect of unique skill in their midst, funds were plentiful, and they were inveterate builders. Alan of Walsingham, alone of English architects, saw a way to overcome the cramped effect produced by a narrow central tower standing over a long church. Clearing a vast space, taking in the aisles of the choir, transepts, and nave, he set out a grand octagon and laid his foundations on the rock. In six years the stone work was finished; the wooden dome and lantern took fourteen years longer. For the angle post of the latter eight oaks over sixty feet long were found after a long search, and the forest of timber, a masterpiece of engineering, was at length safely poised above the great crossing. The stone work was most delicately carved with scenes from the life of St. Etheldreda, the curious niches, no doubt, received their statues from the hand of the Lady Chapel sculptor, the vault and windows were made to glow with a thousand brilliant colours, and Prior Alan could claim indeed the title given him by his brethren—*Flos Operatorum*.



ELY CATHEDRAL



THE OCTAGON

## THE CHOIR, LOOKING WEST

FROM no point is the exquisite lighting of the church better realized than from the presbytery. To the gloom of the richly furnished choir succeeds the brilliance of the octagon, beyond which the long nave stretches westward to the gleaming western Galilee. Viewed when the sun is low, either in the early morning or late afternoon, the scene is one of enchanting beauty and grandeur.

Though Alan of Walsingham's choir may be inferior to the presbytery in purity of style and grace of proportion, it has a luxuriant richness which captivates the eye and disarms criticism. The fine range of fourteenth century stalls has been admirably restored and completed by the panels of M. Abeloos, while the organ case and choir screen have been made to harmonize most happily with the old work.

The choir is separated from the presbytery by two Norman piers, the only remains of the original building. To the east of these piers are the tombs of Bishop Redman (1505-6), an elaborate Perpendicular structure, and Bishop William of Louth (1290-1310), an Early English canopy richly painted. Two bays of the triforium on each side were glazed by Bishop Barnet (1366-73), to admit more light to the shrine of St. Etheldreda, which stood below. From the outside the effect is very ugly.



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THE CHOIR, LOOKING WEST

## THE NORTH CHOIR AISLE

ELY has many tombs of artistic and historic interest, chief among them the Decorated structure in the north choir aisle, known as the shrine of St. Etheldreda. After the dissolution the shrine was moved from its place of honour behind the high altar, and all but the stone part was lost. In this aisle are the tombs of Bishops Northwold and Kilkenny, splendid specimens of thirteenth century work. On the south side of the high altar are buried Bishop Hotham, who held the see during Walsingham's great building period, and the two wives of John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, one of the greatest scholars of his time. The brasses of Bishop Goodrich and Dean Tyndall are interesting examples of ecclesiastical costume of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

At the east end of the choir aisles are the chantry chapels of Bishops Alcock and West, the latter a rare example of early Renaissance work of great delicacy. In it are buried six Saxon bishops and Earl Brithnoth. Close by is a slab of early Norman date, representing the archangel Michael bearing a soul to heaven. It is supposed to be from the tomb of Nigel, Treasurer of Henry I and nephew of the great Roger of Salisbury.



ELY CATHEDRAL



THE NORTH CHOIR AISLE

## THE LADY CHAPEL

THE usual position for the Lady Chapel in English churches was at the east end, projecting beyond the choir. But the shrine of St. Etheldreda, like the shrine of Becket at Canterbury, already occupied the place of honour, so the monks built an entirely separate church at the north-east corner of the north transept. Walsingham laid the foundation stone in 1321, and the work was finished in 1349, that is to say it was carried on while the choir and octagon were rising again from the ruins of the central tower.

The chief feature of the chapel is the richly sculptured arcade, which runs round the entire building. In the spandrels of the lovely ogee canopies is carved a complete history of the Virgin, together with some of the chief events in the life of our Lord. All the figures have been decapitated, but they are most exquisite even in their mutilated condition.

The windows at each end were inserted some time after the chapel was finished, perhaps to give additional support to the heavy vault, which has an unusual span of forty-six feet.

After the destruction of the chapel of St. Cross in 1566, the Lady Chapel was given to the parishioners, and dedicated to the Holy Trinity.

## FROM THE SOUTH

THE picturesque group of buildings, which lies to the south of the cathedral, contains many charming fragments of the extensive offices of the Benedictine monastery. Chief among them for beauty is the little chapel built by Walsingham, for Prior Crauden, which, as Mr. Bond says, "would be the cynosure of any other cathedral, but which passes almost unnoticed amid the glories of Ely." The infirmary buildings and "Gent Hall" lie close to the east end of the cathedral, while the Deanery incorporates a large part of the Guest House, together with fragments of the kitchen and refectory. The King's School, founded by Henry VIII, makes use of the ancient Fair Hall, Gallery Buildings, and Gateway. The latter is known as the Ely Porta, though occasionally it is spoken of as Walpole's Gate, having been built during his priorate. Of the cloisters there are hardly any remains, but two bays have been rebuilt as a vestry; of the chapter-house only enough has been found to determine its rectangular plan.

Ely's exceptional length, 537 feet, shows to its full advantage on the crest of the hill, and the low red roofs of the town, when viewed from the railway or the market place, make a most picturesque foreground.



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THE LADY CHAPEL



FROM THE SOUTH







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